

# The making of *JALL*: Its beginnings and intellectual foundations

PAUL NEWMAN

## *Abstract*

*The Journal of African Languages and Linguistics (JALL) was founded in 1979 at the University of Leiden, with Paul Newman as Editor and Thilo Schadeberg as Associate Editor. Foris Publications was the initial publisher. Motivation for launching a new journal came from the fact that whereas African linguistics in the 1970s was thriving, many of the extant African linguistics journals were floundering. From its inception, JALL was conceived of as a broad-based journal of truly international scope. The intellectual underpinnings of JALL can be found in the original editorial statement, reproduced here, and in the work of three major scholars who were closely associated with African linguistics at Leiden, namely Jan Voorhoeve, with his focus on tone, Kay Williamson, with her dedication to on-site fieldwork, and John Stewart, with his emphasis on solid historical linguistics. The scientific principle that underlay JALL at the outset and continued throughout its thirty-year history was a commitment to sophisticated, theoretically-informed empiricism.*

## **1. Background**

The *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics (JALL)* began publication in 1979. During the 1970s, African linguistics was alive and well. In the U.S., graduate linguistics programs with courses in African languages were flourishing, most notably at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), under the leadership of William E. Welmers, but also at Indiana University, University of Illinois, University of Wisconsin, and Michigan State University. This was partly due to the presence of returned Peace Corps volunteer students with African experience, but was also a consequence of the availability of graduate student funding from the U.S. federal government provided through African area studies programs. The Annual Conference on African Linguistics (ACAL)

was in its first decade and these meetings were invariably well attended and extremely lively, with numerous universities vying to see who could host the next meeting.

African linguistics in France, which had a strong fieldwork component, was centered at the vibrant CNRS (Centre nationale de la recherche scientifique) research program in Paris, operated in association with the Société des études linguistiques et anthropologiques de France (SELAF), an important publishing enterprise operated under the direction of Jacqueline Thomas and Luc Bouquiaux. In England, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), whose research and teaching staff included such notables as Malcolm Guthrie, A. N. Tucker, and F. W. Parsons, had long been considered the Who's Who of African linguistics. By the 1970s SOAS was in a transition stage due to the aging and passing of the old guard; but with the addition of new blood and new ideas to energize its operations, its reputation was still intact. In Belgium, comparative Bantu projects at Tervuren were a source of invaluable research as well as providing research training for advanced students. In Germany, the long-standing Africanist program at the University of Hamburg remained active, while the University of Cologne under Bernd Heine's leadership was developing into an energetic institution of African linguistic studies. During this period, the small African linguistics department at the University of Leiden, the Vakgroep Afrikaanse Taalkunde, was gradually establishing itself as a world center of African linguistics. The department had been instrumental in the running of the Benue-Congo Working Group; it hosted an annual Colloquium on African Languages and Linguistics (CALL), which continues to be a major venue for the field; it had liaison and joint projects with Africanist linguists in Paris; it had a core group of world-class scholars, including Jan Voorhoeve, A. E. Meeussen, and John Stewart; and it attracted outstanding visitors such as Larry Hyman, Erhard Voeltz, and the late Carl Hoffmann. At the same time, African scholars working on African languages – most often their own – some of whom, e.g., Ayọ Bamgboṣe (Nigeria) and Florence Dolphyne (Ghana), had been involved in this enterprise for many years, were increasing in number and significance.

Despite these positive developments, the situation with regard to African linguistics journals was surprisingly bleak. There was a marked increase in research and the production of scholarly papers, yet the outlets were drying up. The flagship *Journal of African Languages*, which had appeared regularly three times a year since its founding in 1962, ceased publication in 1972. Although primarily a SOAS house journal, the annual *African Language Studies* had been a major source of African linguistics studies for a decade and a half. But after volume 16 (1975), which inexplicably suddenly included a number of articles by non-SOAS scholars, nothing appeared until volume 17 (1980), at which time the publication finally ceased. Despite having the re-

sources and reputation of the International African Institute behind it, the journal *African Languages/Langues Africaines*, which began in 1975, never lived up to its promise and barely managed to get out five volumes before its demise in 1979.

By contrast, the venerable *Afrika und Übersee* was functioning well and continues to do so to this day, now being within striking distance of volume 100 (!); but as a heavily German-language publication whose coverage went beyond linguistics and beyond Africa, it could not function as a core African linguistics journal serving the field. Specialized regional journals such as the *Journal of West African Languages (JWAL)* existed, but the only general-purpose journal that one could turn to was *Studies in African Linguistics (SAL)*, which had begun publication in 1970. This was, and remains, an extremely important journal in our field; however, it is intellectually unsound for any academic field to depend on one and one journal only. The health of a discipline depends on the existence of multiple journals with differing outlooks, approaches, and editorial philosophies. Besides, *SAL* back then had a number of drawbacks related to the fact that it was very much an American journal, not to mention being a UCLA journal, with a prevalent bias toward transformational-generative theoretical linguistics.

It was with this background, and in the context of the Leiden department's growth and energy, that the idea of launching a new journal, which eventually became the *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics (JALL)*, emerged. Having witnessed the demise of numerous journals, we committed ourselves to a serious five-year plan. That is, we took the position that unless we could foresee an ongoing influx of suitable papers and the support of peer reviewers, and unless we had the guarantee of adequate financial footing for a full five-year period, it would be foolish to embark on the project.

On the first point, that of scholarly interest, we carried out an informal survey to seek the advice and opinion of knowledgeable colleagues, including the editors of then-existing Africanist journals, to get their sense of the need for an additional journal such as the one that we were considering and to gauge the kind of cooperation we could expect from Africanist scholars. Without exception, they encouraged us to go ahead, although without down-playing the extent of the task involved.

On the second point, funding, we benefited from institutional good will and incredibly good luck. To begin with, Jan Voorhoeve, our head of department, had unimpeachable credentials as far as the administration at the University of Leiden was concerned due to the department's many accomplishments and its well-appreciated international recognition; thus, when we requested a publication subsidy, the university was immediately forthcoming and generous in its response. Rather than complaining about the unavailability of funds for "unessential" projects, as one has come to expect nowadays, the university

showed appreciation for our willingness to take on the burden of such a venture without demanding extra manpower. We of course couldn't expect to depend on university funds forever, but the promise of an initial subsidy allowed us get started in an effective manner. In addition, the Afrika-Studiecentrum, Leiden's African Studies Center, agreed to purchase a good number of journal subscriptions to donate to institutional libraries in Africa that otherwise might not have the financial wherewithal or foreign currency to get the journal. This innovative idea had the double benefit of making the journal available to our colleagues in Africa, something of importance to us philosophically, while immediately adding to our subscriber base.<sup>1</sup>

The good luck relates to Foris Publications. While exploring publisher and printer options for the new journal, I by chance met Henk LaPorte, the remarkable and charming owner of Intercontinental Graphics, a large printing establishment in Dordrecht, who only recently had acquired an inventory of linguistics books (as compensation for outstanding monies owed) and who was thinking about expanding from book printing and production into publishing. With hindsight, our decision to publish *JALL* with the newly established Foris Publications, a publisher which at that point had no track record to go on, was a huge gamble – perhaps one could say “foolhardy” – but it was one that worked out better than we ever could have imagined and for which we will always be thankful to Henk LaPorte. (As is well-known, Foris Publications subsequently developed into an important and influential publisher of linguistics books and journals until it was ultimately taken over by Mouton de Gruyter, the distinguished German publishing house that is *JALL*'s current publisher.) Becoming the publisher of *JALL* was also a gamble for Henk LaPorte, and my guess is that it never really became profitable for him; nevertheless, throughout his years as publisher he was always proud of *JALL* and what he had helped spawn.

In terms of editorial responsibility and the multitudinous tasks of getting the journal off the ground, Thilo Schadeberg, in his role as Associate Editor, and I, as founding Editor, assumed the brunt of the work. We were assisted in the early stages by the generous support of Tom Cook, Hélène Van Leynseele (now Passtoors), and Roxana Ma Newman, a person with professional editorial know-how. (Roxana Newman designed the attractive *JALL* cover that is still in use.) Invaluable encouragement and sage advice were provided by Jan Voorhoeve and John Stewart, who will be discussed in greater detail in Section 3.

---

1. Unfortunately, this generous policy was discontinued in the early 1990s with the result that *JALL* is no longer as readily available in Africa as it used to be.

## 2. Editorial foundations

After extensive discussions and open differences of opinion, the members of the department involved in the establishment of the journal settled on key policy decisions. The first was that *JALL* was to be an international journal, open to the best contributions from scholars around the globe. An alternative that we considered but then rejected was to have an in-house Leiden working papers series, which in some sense would be the counterpart to SOAS's *African Language Studies*. Although this might have met our own professional needs, it was clear that African linguistics required another major journal – on a par with, or even superior to, *SAL* – and not just an informal working papers series. To justify the trouble and expense of starting a new journal, we felt that it had to serve the needs of the international scholarly community and not just those of us at Leiden. *JALL* was to be hosted and run by the department at Leiden, but it was conceptualized as a truly international journal and not a specifically Dutch journal. This international outlook was embodied in the initial Editorial Board, which consisted of important scholars from around the globe: M. H. Abdulaziz (Kenya), Ayo Bamgboṣe (Nigeria), Charles Bird (U.S.A.), Eyamba Bokamba (U.S.A.), A. Coupez (Belgium), J. H. Greenberg (U.S.A.), Claude Hagège (France), Bernd Heine (Germany), Larry Hyman (U.S.A.), Michael Mann (England), Roxana Ma Newman (Netherlands and U.S.A.), Kay Williamson (Nigeria), and Andrzej Zaborski (Poland). (Unlike many editorial boards, where scholars simply agree to contribute their names for symbolic purposes, the *JALL* board was designed as a board whose members undertook to participate actively in various aspects of journal affairs.) This international outlook, which from the very beginning set *JALL* apart from *SAL*, was reflected in the fact that, although the basic language of the journal was English, in the first two volumes alone, four articles and nine book reviews were written in French.

Part of the impetus for the creation of *JALL* was the sense that there was a dearth of outlets for quality articles in African linguistics not only by younger scholars but also by major, well-established, scholars in our field. This was borne out during the first two years of *JALL*'s existence in that this fledgling journal was able to attract contributions – both articles and book reviews – from such leading figures in African linguistics as Pierre Alexandre, Nick Clements, Chet Crieder, Ben Elugbe, Talmy Givón, Claire Grégoire, Bernd Heine, Maurice Houis, Larry Hyman, Herrmann Jungraithmayr, Salikoko Mufwene, William Samarin, Carol Myers Scotton, A. N. Tucker, and Kay Williamson. In the third year, we were delighted when Joseph H. Greenberg, the world's preeminent authority on African linguistics, offered us an important article for publication in our new journal: “Nilo-Saharan moveable -k- as a Stage III article”, *JALL* 3(2). 105–112 (1981).

*JALL* also filled an unmet need by undertaking the publication of book reviews, which remains an important component of the journal to this day. An indication of the outpouring of works in African linguistics at the time and the lack of alternatives for reviews is the fact that the first two volumes of *JALL* contained 35 (!) book reviews, quite a remarkable number for a new journal. In recognition of the need to keep librarians and the scholarly community abreast of new books in our field, we started a section “Recent publications in African linguistics”, which has been appreciated over the years as a valuable bibliographic service.

### 3. Intellectual foundations

Whereas the editorial foundations of *JALL* resulted from overtly agreed-upon decisions that had been hammered out after considerable discussion, and from the scientific preferences and editorial approaches of Thilo Schadeberg and myself, the intellectual foundations emerged by consensus, but in a less conscious fashion. These foundations reflected the scholarly worldview and rich and varied professional experiences of the scholars who constituted the core of what one could call “Leiden African linguistics”. A succinct expression of this shared intellectual viewpoint is found in the *Editorial Statement* that appeared in the initial issue of the journal:

The subject matter of *JALL* is African languages – their structure, their history, their use in society and education. The academic discipline with which *JALL* is concerned is African linguistics, the scientific study of these languages. The use of the phrase “languages and linguistics” in the title expresses our view that the opposition often drawn between language study (thought of as empirical) and linguistic study (thought of as theoretical) is invalid. Our opinion is that different linguists simply work at greater or lesser degrees of abstractness and that interesting and worthwhile studies in the African language field are to be found all along this continuum. Articles submitted for publication in *JALL* will thus be evaluated without recourse to philosophical or theoretical preconditions. Our only requirement will be that articles contain new data, analyses, or interpretations and that they add significantly to our knowledge of the languages and linguistic phenomena being treated.

This scholarly philosophy was reflected directly or indirectly in the works of the many different contributors to *JALL* throughout its thirty-year history. But in discussing the essential foundations, I intend to limit myself here to the influence of three highly respected scholars and valued colleagues: Jan Voorhoeve, Kay Williamson, and John Stewart.

### 3.1. Jan Voorhoeve (1923–1983)<sup>2</sup>

From the time that he came to Leiden in 1964 until his untimely death at age 60 in 1983, Jan Voorhoeve was the driving force behind and the face of Leiden African linguistics. Without Jan's energy, enthusiasm, engaging personality, and wide-ranging contacts, both within the Netherlands and abroad – note, for example, that he was on the executive committee of the International African Institute – *JALL* would not have been possible. His influence on *JALL* from an intellectual point of view manifests itself in a number of areas. First, he was always open to new ideas and new analytical approaches and theories. Unlike many European Africanists of this period, who were suspicious of and resistant to the predominantly generative linguistic work of young Americans, Jan welcomed these developments and absorbed them in his own research. At the same time, he was eclectic in his approach and rejected doctrinaire adherence to any one theory or another. This became the *JALL* philosophy. His openness to multiple viewpoints fit in with his international perspective when it came to African and Creole studies and to linguistics in general. For Jan, *JALL* was to be an international journal, not just as an editorial/social phenomenon, but also in terms of the impact that this would have on *JALL*'s intellectual breadth.

Of the specific themes and topics that the journal could be expected to encourage and promote, tone was at the top of Jan's list. Jan's inaugural lecture at Leiden some decade earlier had been on tone types, and for him tone had a special significance in African languages and the study of complex tone systems, drawing on insightful and often quite abstract concepts and analyses, represented intellectual challenges of the highest order. It is thus not an accident that in *JALL* Volume 1, Number 1, there were three papers on tone (two articles and one review article), these being by colleagues with whom Jan had interacted and worked, namely Larry Hyman, Jacqueline Leroy, and Nick Clements. Whether explicitly addressed or not, tone in African languages has always remained an essential part of the definition of *JALL*.

### 3.2. Kay Williamson (1935–2005)<sup>3</sup>

Kay Williamson went to Nigeria in the 1960s, holding professorial positions first in Ibadan and then in Port Harcourt, where she worked until her retirement in 2000. Given this lifetime commitment to living and working in West Africa, it is only natural that for her, fieldwork – which meant firsthand research in the locations where languages are spoken and not just pseudo-fieldwork in some

---

2. See his obituary in *JALL* 5(1). 107 (1983).

3. See her obituary in *JALL* 26(1). 79–80 (2005).

quick, token fashion – constituted an essential component of African linguistics. For Kay, fieldwork meant long-term involvement in the study of a language in its cultural context, and, where possible, it also meant the significant participation of the speakers of the language themselves, whether in dealing with formal linguistic questions or in designing orthographies for practical use.

Although Kay had a deep interest in historical/comparative linguistics – she was a core member of the Benue-Congo working group – her real impact on the intellectual development of *JALL* lay in her emphasis on carefully-documented, reliable, theoretically-sophisticated descriptive work, as seen in her early *A Grammar of the Kolokuma Dialect of Ijo* (West African Language Monograph Series, 2), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1965), this being a revision of her Yale University Ph.D. dissertation.

Despite being professionally based in Nigeria, which before the age of email and the internet meant a considerable amount of intellectual isolation, Kay retained close ties with the Leiden department throughout her career. She even filled in as professor in 1984–1985 after Jan Voorhoeve's death. She helped launch *JALL* by serving on the founding editorial board and by writing an article for the first issue that would set the quality standard being aimed for. This was followed later by two other *JALL* articles. Here is the list:

Medial consonants in Proto-Ijo, *JALL* 1(1). 73–94 (1979).

Assimilation, dissimilation and fusion: Vowel quality and verbal reduplication in Lower Cross, *JALL* 6(1). 1–18 (1984) (with Nicholas Faraclas).

The noun prefixes of New-Benue-Congo, *JALL* 14(1). 73–94 (1993).

### 3.3. *John Stewart (1926–2006)*<sup>4</sup>

John Stewart held the position of Research Professor at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana from 1961–1973 and then Professor in Leiden from 1975–1985. Three aspects of his research had a particular impact on the intellectual underpinnings of *JALL*. First, was his view that phonology, whether dealing with vowel harmony or with so-called fortis-lenis contrasts, had to be grounded in phonetics. Second was the recognition of the importance of sophisticated theory in descriptive and analytical work. If Jan Voorhoeve was open to and accepting of theoretical work, John Stewart demonstrated how one could put theory to work. Third, John was a historical linguist par excellence. His lifelong research program involved applying the traditional, strictly conceived comparative method to African languages. Whereas Kay Williamson could be described as someone who was extremely interested in historical linguistics but as a practitioner was a descriptive linguist, John could be viewed

---

4. See his obituary in *JALL* 28(1). 71–74 (2007).



as someone who was interested in and valued careful descriptive studies but in essence was a historical linguist. And thus, from its beginnings historical studies constituted one of *JALL*'s major emphases. Significantly, the very first article in the first number of *JALL* was A. E. Meeussen's Proto-Bantu reconstruction (translated by Thilo Schadeberg and myself).

John jointly authored an article in the first issue of *JALL* and he continued to use *JALL* as a primary outlet for his major writings over the next two decades. Here is the list:

Underlying cross-height vowel harmony in Nen (Bantu A.44), *JALL* 1(1). 31–54 (1979) (with Hélène Van Leynseele).

Key lowering (downstep/downglide) in Dschang, *JALL* 3(2). 113–138 (1981).

Review article: Downstep and floating low tones in Adioukrou, *JALL* 5(1). 57–78 (1983).

Review article: The comparative phonology of Gbe and its significance for that of Kwa and Volta-Congo, *JALL* 15(2). 175–193 (1994).

An explanation of Bantu vowel height harmony in terms of Pre-Bantu nasalized vowel lowering, *JALL* 21(2). 123–134 (2000).

The potential of Proto-Potou-Akanic-Bantu as a pilot Proto-Niger-Congo, and the reconstructions updated, *JALL* 23(2). 197–224 (2002).

#### 4. Conclusion

If one had to capture the intellectual foundation of *JALL* in one word, that word would be *empiricism*. This does not refer to naïve empiricism of the mindless, random data collection sort propounded by advocates of the now popular language documentation fad, but rather what could be characterized as scientifically sound, intellectually sophisticated empiricism (see the *JALL* Editorial Statement reproduced earlier in §3). Whether in the domain of tone or in the reconstruction of Proto-Bantu noun classes, the *JALL* ethos was that facts count, that theories exist to elucidate observed phenomena, that descriptive findings serve to correct and enrich theoretical generalizations, and that the goal of African linguistics is to expand our understanding of African languages in all of their complexity and scientific beauty. Furthering this goal underlay the establishment of *JALL*; it has been its role for the past three decades; and it hopefully will remain *JALL*'s guiding principle as the next generation of African linguists carries on the work that we began some thirty years ago.

*Indiana University*  
[pnxxpn@indiana.edu](mailto:pnxxpn@indiana.edu)